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ABSTRACT

Neither the introductory survey of research course nor the audit course adequately prepares the organizational communication specialist for a career in a nonacademic organization. Therefore it is important for the organizational communication graduate student to receive some experiential or quasiexperiential learning along with his or her training in auditing techniques. Case analysis study can provide this experience based learning. There are, however, some instructional design problems that must be overcome before case analysis study can be implemented. Organizational communication must first develop its own collection of case studies emphasizing communication oriented issues. Even after this collection is developed, the question remains as to how much practical benefit the students will receive from the use of these studies. Actual practice with a client in the capacity of "a professional in training" might provide a student near the end of a graduate program with the skills needed to be a genuine professional. Organizations would probably be receptive to the idea of receiving communication consultants without charge in exchange for their providing the sites for training. (JL)

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A Dialogue on Case Analysis in
Organizational Communication Instruction

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A Dialogue on Case Analysis in
Organizational Communication Instruction

When considering the use of case analysis as an instructional tool for organizational communication students, issues may be raised from both teaching and learning perspectives.

- I. The graduate student's perspective includes potential employment in organizational settings.
 - A. What is the relationship between "conventional" curricula and career applications for the organizational communication graduate?
 1. Organizational communication research primarily includes lab studies, surveys, and descriptive field studies.
 2. Questions exist about the degree of application of such studies to "real life" organizations.
 - B. Courses surveying research place the organizational communication specialist in the role of observer, documentor, who wishes not to intervene for change.
 - C. Training in audit administration provides a useful tool but offers practice in only one aspect of potential organizational communication application.
 1. Communication auditing is a necessary skill.
 2. Communication auditing may become the individual's only recourse because of limited experience with other possible organizational communication strategies.
- II. Experiential learning could expand the potential repertoire of the organizational communication specialist.
 - A. Learning through experience can expand the abilities of individuals to deal with the ambiguous, the unexpected, the unpredictable.
 - B. Actually placing individuals in operating organizations is impractical in many cases.
 1. It would be costly for the organization.
 2. Student intervention would, of necessity, be on a school calendar cycle, and problems in the organization do not conveniently fit that cycle.

- C. Quasi-experiential learning can be offered to students through Case Analysis as practiced in business education by some schools.
 - 1. Case Analysis offers a form of experiential learning since students work on unique problems grounded in real organizational situations.
 - 2. Case Analysis has been used in human relations training.
 - 3. Case Analysis offers the opportunity to integrate all prior related learning and to seek new information as well.
- D. Placed after survey and audit courses but before actual intervention as in consulting courses or on-the-job internships, Case Analysis could be a useful preparation for careers in organizational communication practice.

III. There are some concerns from an instructional design perspective about the integration of such a course.

- A. Some research suggests that students not guided well leave such a course poorly prepared.
- B. The business discipline has a "library" of cases which have been prepared over time. Organizational communication needs to devise its own collection with special emphasis on communication concerns.
- C. Would such a course really make a difference in employability for organizational communication graduates?
- D. How much more realistic is a "case" than an extended example used to illustrate some point? What principles do students take away with them?
- E. The final analysis--is it worth it?

CASE ANALYSIS IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

The authors have engaged in a dialogue on the subject of case analysis as an instructional tool in organizational communication for almost a year now. We thought the dialogue a useful medium for illustrating some of the many teaching and learning concerns from the perspectives of both the professor and the student. The dialogue parallels a wider professional dialogue taking place regarding instruction in organizational communication.

Because increasing numbers of undergraduate and graduate students are concentrating their studies in organizational communication, it seems likely that a significant percentage do so in preparation for a career of organizational practice. It is important to examine whether conventional curricula in organizational communication actually provide learning activities which lead to skilled professional practice. Those of us in graduate study with academic careers in mind use theory and laboratory or field research as a ground-work for building an individual life plan of further theory or research-building. Individuals who expect to become organizational communication specialists or practitioners in non-academic organizations require learning experiences which build the kinds of problem-solving skills necessary to function in actual situations. Smith, Richetto and Zima (1972) point out that while organizational communication research has included laboratory and field experiments, surveys and descriptive field studies, "there has always been some question about the degree of application of the results of laboratory studies to real-life organizations, for they are typically conducted without organizational constraints such as large size, hierarchy, technology, geographical dispersion and so forth."

If the basic or introductory foundation course in organizational communication is a survey of current theory and research, students have little opportunity to see the applied role of the specialist practicing within the organization itself. A course which surveys research places the organizational communication specialist in the role of observer and documenter or describer of phenomena in which s/he wishes, in fact, not to intervene so as not to compromise the situation being studied.

For these two reasons, the introductory survey of research course is useful as a beginning but is not nearly a complete preparation for a career in organizational communication practice. Sometimes, a course in administering communication audits follows the introductory course. Such training is more "applied" in the sense that the student may actually be involved in the administration of an audit in a functioning organization. Certainly such a course seems appropriately founded upon the survey course preceding it. Further, it offers the student the opportunity to actually learn to investigate communication in a real organization. Much can be learned from administering an audit to a real client organization under the close supervision of an experienced professor.

Using the audit course as the primary training for organizational practice has its drawbacks, however. Armed with experience in administering the audit, students have a sophisticated instrument at their disposal, but a limited repertoire of other tools or skills which may not--given specific problems or situations in a "real life" organization --be appropriate to the needs of the organization. "Give a small child a hammer and he will soon find that everything needs pounding." Yet audit administration is the technique which the student has most experience and familiarity with and feels comfortable carrying out.

There is danger that his own uncertainty about "what to do" will lead to audit administration simply because that is what s/he feels comfortable with. It seems logical to infer that some form of experiential learning exposing the student to the ambiguities of organizational life and communication while being guided in problem solving by the experienced professor as an advisor would be a useful course when placed sequentially after the survey and audit courses. Thus the student would learn that "real life" organizations exhibit situations which do not fall into convenient categories nor are they necessarily quickly resolvable through the audit procedure.

But what organization will invite these students to enter in their novice state? Few organizations (at least profit-making ones) are willing to support such on-site training because it costs money and, occasionally, students make mistakes which require fixing up. Further, businesses cannot be expected to follow the University-type timeline

which implies that a learning cycle be 10 or 12 or 15 weeks long and that which can be learned must be learned in that time period.

The Harvard Business School has applied the Case Method in an attempt to reach out to such a need in its business students. As former Dean Towl explains, "The written case is the first step in recreating for large numbers of students the experience of the case researcher in the field." (1969) Pigors and Pigors have integrated the case analysis method into human relations training and argue persuasively on its behalf: "Studying cases gears in with the process of achieving experience when case method begins to be built into our minds as a way of looking at people and happenings in order to learn." (1961)

As Murdoch et al point out, the case method can provide a means for student integration of "all the rules, principles and theory he has learned in all previous courses....It calls upon him to improvise, compromise and optimize in realistic situations where neatly developed principles only provide guidelines." (1976)

The case method is already being applied in some organizational communication training today.

As a doctoral student in Organizational Communication, I believe that case analysis can contribute to the learning of a repertoire of skills useful to the student who will eventually become the organizational communication practitioner. I believe it is particularly important that some form of experiential or quasi-experiential contact with actual organizational problems take place along with training in auditing techniques so that students learn that the audit is but one of an unlimited array of potential activities which the organizational communication practitioner might engage in to do his or her job.

At the same time there are some instructional design concerns from the instructor's perspective. First, is the lack of well developed cases that focus on organizational communication. The business discipline has a "library" of cases which have been prepared over time. Organizational Communication needs to devise its own collection of case studies which have special emphasis on communication oriented issues. Well developed, well thought out cases takes a great deal of time to

prepare. As a consequence, it would seem that if organizational communication is to follow the business model, it may be some time before the appropriate resources are available for such a course.

Even when fully developed cases are developed there is some concern about the practical nature of discussing in class what may appear to students as nothing more than an extended illustration. What principles do students take with them? How similar is any situation a student might face in their work world to the hypothetical world described in the case? Is the organizational specialist really any better prepared? Actual practice with a client as a "professional in training" near the end of a graduate program allows the student to test his/her own capabilities rather than examining the approaches of hypothetical others. After extensive study on theoretical approaches and practical intervention tools, the student should be ready to make entry with an organization whose organizational complexity matches the students' level of skill. If a graduate student isn't ready to call him/herself a "professional" at this point, when will they be able to?

Certainly, there will always be different levels of skill and professionalism, however, to the extent possible the student needs to test his/her professionalism. As with internship programs, organizations have been very receptive to the idea of receiving the benefits of a communication consultant in training without charge, in exchange for providing the site for that training.

The final analysis must answer this question: What are the potential benefits of case study analysis in organizational communication, and is it worth the effort?

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